

Cynical America?

Misunderstanding the Public's Message

By Robert M. Eisinger

The view that cynicism is on the rise in the US has become a truism among scholars, political pundits and elected officials. Sociologists and political scientists claim that "cynicism about elections is growing," that the 1990s are a "cynical age," and that a "fog of cynicism" surrounds American politics. Columbia University historian Alan Brinkley has said we live in "a time of unparalleled public cynicism about politics, which has continued (and accelerated) to this day."

The notion that cynicism pervades America transcends political party and profession. Vice President Al Gore has spoken about cynicism becoming a "malignant habit in democracy," and President Clinton has commented about an abundance of cynicism in America. Republicans Steve Forbes and Elizabeth Dole have echoed these sentiments. Reputable pollsters also have argued that cynicism is pervasive in America (e.g., according to Andrew Kohut, Director of the Pew Center for Press and Policy, "This is a very, very cynical public.") Even Walter Cronkite has remarked that "cynicism is rampant in our political culture."

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Frequently, discussions about cynicism revolve around trust in government. Low levels of trust and high levels of cynicism supposedly threaten democratic rule. David Easton, Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider have all written about trust in politics as a cornerstone of legitimate democratic regimes. Comments about cynicism in the US presume that cynicism is with us, and that its presence inevitably stunts political participation to dangerously low levels. The unanimity of opinion among scholars about the cynical status of America should not surprise us, but it should alarm us. If Americans are as cynical as alleged, then the political fabric of American democracy is either shredding into pieces, or it is about to.

What is Cynicism?

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary defines a cynic as "one who believes that human conduct is motivated wholly by self-interest. A person who expects nothing but the worst of human conduct and motives." Other definitions of cynic, cynical and cynicism include "someone who does not trust or respect the goodness of other people and their actions, believing that people are interested only in themselves," "contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives," "showing little or no faith in human nature; distrustful or contemptuous of others' motives," "showing contempt for accepted standards of honesty or morality by one's actions, especially by actions that exploit the scruples of others; bitterly or sneeringly distrustful, contemptuous, or pessimistic," and "a refusal to engage with the world as much as a disposition of antagonism toward it, a flight into solitude and interiority and an abnegation of politics on the basis of its inauthenticity." However these definitions vary, they all denote cynicism as more than mere distrust. Cynicism is an intense attitude; it entails antagonistic distrust of or contempt for humanity. In taking a cynical position, one experiences a sense of the political; rather than being politically indifferent, the cynic

is keenly aware of politics and the political environment.

"Cynic": It's Fit to Print

There has been a significant increase in the number of times the word "cynic," and its derivatives ("cynics," "cynical," "cynicism,") have been used in the press in the past seventeen years.¹ In 1980, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* collectively published the word "cynic!" 682 times. By 1990, "cynic!" was printed 1412 times, and in 1997, there were 1433 "cynic!" references in the two newspapers.

Additional content analyses indicate there has been a significant increase in the number of times "cynic!" has been published simultaneously with "societ!" or "public!" In 1980, these words are to be found in the same article 323 times. By 1997, this has grown to 676 times. The number of times "cynic!" and either "societ!" or "public!" was printed in the same paragraph also has increased over time (64 in 1980, rising to 183 in 1997).² The uses of these words frequently spike on the even years, suggesting that they are printed more frequently during congressional and presidential election years than in off-election years.

Similarly, in 1980, there were 411 articles with the two terms "cynic!" and "America!;" by 1997, the number had almost doubled to 814 times. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published "cynic!" either with "poll!" "survey!" or "data" 135 times in 1980, and 269 times in 1997. Here again, the election-year spikes are most visible; national election years produce significantly more references than non-national election years.

The collective data suggest that use of the word "cynic!" is rising over time, and that many of these usages refer to a cynical American public.

Everyday Life

The question is, does this increased usage of the word "cynic!" correspond with an actual rise in cynicism itself?

Measuring Cynicism in the Polls

As stated earlier, cynicism pertains to some form of contemptuous or hostile lack of trust. Unfortunately, political scientists have been conflating cynicism with simple distrust, beginning even before it became fashionable to describe Americans as cynical. In 1974, Arthur Miller evaluated measures of cynicism by using a five-item Trust in Government scale from the Center for Political Studies (CPS):³

- How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?
- Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?
- Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?
- Do you feel that almost all of the people running for government are smart people who usually know what they are doing, or do you think that quite a few of them don't seem to know what they are doing?
- Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked at all?

The first question alone does not exude the hostility and contempt that are part of the many definitions of what constitutes cynicism. The second presents a false dichotomy that forces respondents to choose between two equally unrealistic options. To assert that the government is run for the benefit of all the people is to propound a sanguine view of government, but to suggest that government is "pretty much" run by a few big interests is plausible, especially when one considers that corporations, unions, and party elites constitute a few big interests that generate much of the American political discourse. The phrase "pretty much" dilutes the captious anger and hostility that is essential to what constitutes cynicism. To equate one's view of wasteful spending with cynicism, as the third question does, conflates the definition of cynicism and fiscal conservatism. Question four measures only one's views about the intellectual competency of elected officials, while question five evaluates no more than whether or not people think government leaders are "a little crooked."

Indeed, Jack Citrin criticized Miller's analysis, arguing that the Trust in Government scale did not measure cynical

attitudes: "To believe that the government wastes 'a lot' of money, can be trusted to 'do what is right only some of the time,' and includes 'quite a few' people who are 'crooked' or 'don't know what they are doing' need not bespeak a deep-seated hostility toward the political system at regime or community levels... [I]n the 1972 election study 74% of those who score 'low' on the Trust in Government scale express pride in 'our form of government.'"⁴

Citrin then went on to argue, however, that discontent actually had produced cynicism, even as he retained his criticisms of the scale that purported to measure it: "Increasing discontent with current government policy undoubtedly has contributed to the growth of political cynicism, but the decline in 'trusting' responses to the Trust in Government items may also reflect a higher level of political sophistication and realism among the general public. In addition, the current zeitgeist, which legitimizes, even encourages, the expression of anti-political rhetoric, makes it fashionable to denigrate politicians and to criticize established institutions. As a result, the burgeoning ranks of the politically cynical may include many who are verbalizing a casual and ritualistic negativism rather than an enduring sense of estrangement that influences their beliefs and actions."

But can cynics be loyal fans of their regime? Fred Steeper and Christopher Blunt describe Citrin's interpretation of Americans' ostensibly cynical attitudes as "fans booing their team during a losing streak while remaining loyal fans."⁵ Citrin maintained his belief that Americans were cynical even as he simultaneously suggested that (a) the CPS items may have measured political realism rather than cynicism, and (b) the political environment (i.e., the Watergate era) may have encouraged the expression of antipathy toward American politicians. Citrin concluded that "the meaning of recent increases in the level of political cynicism remains ambiguous, and to decisively conclude that there exists widespread support for radical political change or pervasive alienation from the political system is premature, if not misleading."

The conflation of cynicism and distrust continued to prevail through the 1980s and into the 90s among political scientists, even when the data did not portray a cynical public. A 1992 study of 106 college students, entitled "A Study of Cynicism, Personality, and Work Values," concluded that only 2% of its sample could be classified as cynical, whereas 84% were classified as "skeptical realists." Donald Kanter and Philip Mirvis revealed in their 1989 book, *The Cynical Americans: Living and Working in An Age of Discontent and Disillusion*, that only 19% of respondents strongly agreed with the question "Most people are not really honest by nature"—hardly a convincing indicator of a cynical polity. Kanter and Mirvis' study was further flawed by their misunderstanding of what cynicism is, as they cited low church attendance, high divorce rates and more income tax evasion as signs of cynicism in the 1980s. To them, the workplace was rife with cynicism,

but their data showed a society not of cynics, but of skeptical divorcees.

In 1995, a series of *Washington Post* articles repeatedly cited poll data about trust in government and individuals to denote a cynical polity. The polls, conducted in December by the *Washington Post* and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation with Harvard University, and presented along with data from the National Election Studies (NES) and the General Social Survey (GSS), indicated that fewer people trust one another than they did thirty years ago.

In one instance, respondents were asked, "Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" While 54% of a 1964 sample had said that most people could be trusted, only 35% thought so in 1995. The headline on the front page article declared, "Americans Losing Trust in Each Other and Institutions: Suspicion of Strangers Breeds Widespread Cynicism," and a continuing headline on another page read "Cynicism About Government Spreads to Other Institutions." The article cited additional survey questions, including the following:

- Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful dealing with people? (63% responded "can't be too careful")
- Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair? (48% responded "would take advantage")
- Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves? (48% responded "looking out for themselves")

Like the CPS items, these questions and answers were poor indicators of cynicism. The GSS question "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be

too careful in dealing with people?" is unbalanced and evokes a negative response. The parallel response to "most people can be trusted" is "most people cannot be trusted," not "you can't be too careful in dealing with people." A person may conscientiously lock car and home doors, and not talk to strangers who provide unsolicited comments, but generally still be trusting of others and not cynical. If being too careful with people measures cynicism, then Americans indeed are a cynical lot.

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The second question was a better attempt at deciphering citizens' hostility and contempt for humanity and politics, but the answer revealed that a minority of Americans gave the allegedly cynical response. The third question was particularly unbalanced. The opposite of helpful is hurtful or unhelpful, not "mostly just looking out for themselves." Does "looking out for oneself" constitute failing to aid someone who has a flat tire, not seeking to find shelter for a homeless person, or not helping a friend with homework when one finds the same assignment unusually challenging? It is possible that people are unhelpful in many contexts without thinking of themselves as cynical.

Other Attempts to Measure Cynicism

In 1997, Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson published a book entitled *The Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and Public Good*. Their study includes "forced choice" items, such as "The campaign was concerned with policies to meet the city's needs/The campaign was concerned with standing in the polls," "The candidates were grandstanding/The candidates were focused on problems," and "The candidates' concerns were getting elected/The candidates' concerns were the city's problems."

As with the surveys cited in the *Washington Post* articles, these questions prove to be of dubious value as measures of cynicism. For instance, a respondent who answers that candidates grandstand or are more concerned about getting elected than about the city's problems may be politically astute and not cynical at all. Campaigns frequently are designed to manipulate voters; respondents who concur may be expressing high levels of political cognition, not cynicism.

Capella and Jamieson also posed ten agree/disagree questions about a local political race. The first question asked for agreement or disagreement with the statement, "What [the candidates] said depended on who was listening." Politicians frequently tailor their rhetoric to their audience; to do otherwise is imprudent and unwise. To say that politicians said one thing to one audience and another thing to a different audience doesn't denote cynicism, but possibly an awareness of the rhetorical strategies used by candidates. Question two read, "They only took chances when they were behind in the polls." Agreeing with this phrase suggests political acumen; candidates who take chances when they are ahead in the polls frequently find themselves losing votes. The ninth question was entirely puzzling: "The candidates explained what it was about their backgrounds that qualified them for mayor." While these questions will evoke certain answers from cynics, they may evoke the same answers from non-cynics; therefore it is erroneous to use such statements to identify cynics.

More Evidence of a Non-Cynical American Public

Even if we grant that simple distrust can be equated with cynicism, those who claim Americans are cynical must contend with poll data which suggest that any increase in US citizens' lack of trust in government may be overstated. According to CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll data, about 50% of respondents have had a favorable opinion of the Democratic and Republican parties over

Everyday Life

the past four years. In July 1992, the Republican and Democratic parties were given favorable opinions by 53% and 54% of the electorate respectively. In April 1996, when the newspaper usage of "cynic!" approached its apex, 52% of respondents gave the GOP a favorable rating, and 55% responded favorably to the Democrats. In February 1999, favorability for the GOP dipped to 45% but remained at 55% for the Democrats.

Approval of Congress has ebbed and flowed, also suggesting that US citizens are neither increasingly cynical nor increasingly distrustful. In a March 1992 Gallup poll, only 18% of respondents approved of the way Congress was handling its job. By October of 1994, this figure had inched to 21%. In April of 1996, it had risen to 35%, and in February of 1999 it climbed to 41%. Similarly, in mid-January 1992, 62% of citizens in a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll believed that their member of Congress deserved re-election. In mid-January 1996, the identical question yielded a virtually identical 61%. The data pertaining to Congress rebut the notion of a cynical populace.

In September 1996, respondents to a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll were asked if they had "a great deal of trust, a moderate amount of trust, equal amounts of trust and distrust, a moderate amount of distrust, or a great deal of distrust" in the government in Washington to do what is right. Only 16% of the respondents had a great deal of distrust in the government, and only a third of the respondents (32%) could be categorized as having either moderate or great distrust.

If strong distrust and cynicism are correlated, then the absence of strong distrust is further evidence that there are not high levels of cynicism among US citizens. The data suggest not a cynical American public, but an astute, critical citizenry.

Conclusion

Not everyone believes that the

American public is cynical or that mistrust of government constitutes cynicism. Senate Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) questions the notion that attitudes are changing: "[M]istrust is the normal condition... and its absence is revelatory and rare." Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich also questioned cynicism's pervading America, stating, "I don't find nearly as much cynicism in the public as I do in the elites."

Those who think that Americans are cynical must find better questions with which to measure American attitudes, and in so doing, they also must explain how a cynical citizenry remains politically participatory, religious and altruistic. What explains the public's enduring faith and trust in religion and its simultaneous distrust in government, or the continued volunteerism of Americans? The pro-cynic camp must address how citizens can maintain faith in one institution (e.g., church) even as they are supposed to be losing faith and gaining enmity for another institution (government).

What explains the misperception that we are cynical? Director of CBS News Surveys, Kathleen Frankovic, suggests that the media are asking more cynical questions than in the past, and that the barrage of cynical probing by media pollsters may generate a general sense that cynicism is part of the American political fabric. James Hanson agrees, stating that when journalists say, "Surely, Minister (Senator, whoever), you can't expect us to believe that," they "foster the belief that politicians routinely evade the truth and break their promises." When reporters and pollsters conflate mistrust with cynicism, without reflecting on what cynicism is or how it can be measured, they may conclude that Americans are cynical, when they actually have identified some (arguably healthy) manifestations of distrust. By disseminating the view that Americans are cynical, Americans may come to believe it, perpetuating the myth as it redefines our language and reshapes our attitudes.

In an article that purports to show how cynical Americans are, a man is quoted as saying: "I haven't had confidence in government since I started voting 40 years ago." Without better indicators of cynicism, virtually any measurement of cynicism will satisfy its operational definition. To misdefine cynicism as mistrust is to misgauge citizen attitudes about their politics.

Endnotes

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¹In order to avoid repetition, these terms will be referred to as "cynic!," the code used in LEXIS/NEXIS to find all words that begin with cynic, and its derivatives. Similarly, "public!" refers to the word "public" and its derivatives, "societ!" is used to include "society" and its derivatives, and so on.

²The LEXIS/NEXIS database is imprecise in what it considers "within the same sentence." If a word is used within ten words of another word, it is considered to be within the sentence, even though the two words may not be in the same sentence. Nonetheless, the overall data continue to suggest an increase in the terms when used near each other.

³Arthur Miller, "Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970." *American Political Science Review*, 1974, 68:989-1001.

⁴Jack Citrin, "Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government." *American Political Science Review*, 1974, 68:973-88.

⁵Fred Steeper and Christopher Blunt, "The Discontent and Cynicism of the American Public: Analysis of Trust in Government Attitudes," (Market Strategies Inc., 1995).



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